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ABSTRACT

Although theories on developmental writing assume that basic writers do not write well because of cognitive deficits, recent research and classroom experience suggest that poor writers lack skill because they have not had sufficient contextually meaningful practice. Writing research indicates that the unskilled writer's tendency to write as if they were talking is not the result of a speech-dependent stage of writing development, but is the product of poorly constructed writing tasks, tasks calling out context-dependent, cryptic, and ill-formed writing from everyone. Furthermore, the experience of skilled writers suggests that the speech dependent stage of writing development is never outgrown--whenever the solitary act of writing about challenging topics becomes too difficult, writers of all calibers express the need to talk about their work. As writing is significant only when it is part of a meaningful context, the value of assigning papers that have no contextual meaning for students is questionable. Although teachers may provide the cue for writing, they must let students determine the context and the text and then help the students transform these into academically acceptable writing. (MM)

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A CONTEXTUALIZED PERSPECTIVE ON DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING

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A paper presented at the
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I remember a writer, a black twelfth grade student, putting down his pencil and asking me, "You know, and I know, I'm going to get a job working with my hands, so why do I have to do this writing?" The question surprised me, and so did my answer: "Because people who read and write have power over people who don't." My comment was made in reference to my own writing; I had recently written to a tax auditor, accusing him of violating my right to privacy and prompting him to drop his audit of my federal return. Very powerful, indeed.

For some years I have argued that the study of relations between speaking and writing provides an appropriate conceptual base for understanding unskilled high school and college writers. And I still make this argument, though in the past year I have changed my mind about what it means. The change is in the direction suggested by my opening anecdote. My purposes here are to announce this change, to tell why I think it is sensible, and to explore its meaning for teaching.

First, though, a context for my remarks, since I assume some of you are unfamiliar with the implications of speaking-writing research for teaching basic writing. The main idea is that unskilled writers are developmentally suspended between speaking and writing, between the comfortable strengths of everyday spoken dialogue and the unfamiliar,

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partially learned conventions of academic written monologue (see the Schafer, Kroll, and Kantor & Rubin essays in Kroll & Vann, 1981, for elaboration of this statement). As a result, the dialogic form and interpersonal function of everyday speech influence their writing. In plainer terms, we can say that unskilled writers, owing to a lack of reading and writing practice, tend to write as if they were talking. Spelling is often accomplished through sound or through analogy with similar sounding words. As in speech, written sentences are juxtaposed, run together or connected loosely by one or two overworked conjunctions, and these sentences often are rather vacant in the subject position. Meaning is implicit and abbreviated, as if the reader were a partner in dialogue.

At the levels of sound, syntax, and sense, then, talk can leave its imprint on writing. This observation has led to two competing pedagogical stances. One argues that talk is a natural basis for writing; teachers would advise students "to write like you talk." The other is that talk interferes with writing; here the advice is "don't write like you talk; write in accordance with the conventions of written language instead." My modest contribution here has been to strike a compromise. I've argued that speaking -- classroom discussion, peer and teacher writing conferences, oral presentations, and so on -- can be the basis of dissolving writing anxiety, of getting the writing to appear, and of transforming the writing into full, explicit, acceptable, and even published, academic prose. My logic has been rather straightforward: if speaking and writing interact developmentally, they should interact instructionally as well.

I was originally attracted to this line of reasoning because it promises to get developmental writing out from under the assumption of cognitive deficit. This is the belief that basic writers can't write because they can't think. Or that they can't think because they can't write. Either way, the "can't write" position makes a rather silly basis for teaching writing: if they really can't write, why bother trying to teach them to?

When the undisguised assumption was that some writers don't have the smarts to make it in the regular college composition classroom, we invented Bonehead English. Later, Bonehead gave way to Remedial, and the assumption of cognitive deficit went underground, buried beneath the medical metaphor of etiology, diagnosis, and prescriptive treatment. Now the dominant metaphor is one of development, of organic or natural growth through a continuum of identifiable, sequentially ordered stages. Problem: whether we argue that some adult writers have something wrong which remediation will cure or that they are arrested at an early stage of cognitive development, we might in effect still be labelling them Boneheads. It is possible, in short, that the meaning of developmental writing is still tinged with the assumption of cognitive deficit.

This possibility shows up, for example, when we argue that the adult beginning writer is egocentric (Moffett, 1968; Shaughnessy, 1977), has not attained a concept-forming level of cognitive development (Lunsford, 1979), and in matters of coherence is like a young child (Brostoff, 1981). In these and similar arguments we seem to be looking for reasons, singularly psychological ones, why basic writers

"can't write."

For me, the meaning of teaching in accordance with a developmental transition from speaking to writing has rested on the assumption that basic writers don't write. It's not that they can't; they just don't. Basic writers simply haven't read or written enough to have a working knowledge of the print code and how it is used to construct and communicate meaning. They are simply not accustomed to using reading and writing for personal and transactional purposes; the key to their development as writers would seem to be practice with written language.

This assumption -- that basic writers don't write — gets to the change in my thinking, the change I promised to discuss at the beginning of this paper. I would now modify the claim that basic writers don't write by including a qualifier about meaningless functions of writing. Basic writers, like the rest of us, don't write unless they have good reasons to. Good reasons to write are those which make writing a means of connecting with people and ideas. The writing, thus, serves real functions in real contexts. Where I once believed that a general lack of practice with written language was the primary source of the writing problems of unskilled writers, I now believe it is probably more a specific lack of contextually meaningful practice. Pedagogically, it is the quality of writing and reading practice that matters; not just any practice will do.

Before explaining this contextualized perspective on developmental writing, I want to tell you why I changed my mind. I have three reasons, all based in my work.

The first reason grows out of a series of studies in which I examined the assumption that inexplicit meaning in student writing is attributable to the influence of spoken dialogue. These are my semantic abbreviation studies; after Vygotsky (1934/1962; 1978) I was wondering if the semantic abbreviation characteristic of verbal thought is transformed only as far as spoken dialogue in weak writing, and not into written monologues as in strong writing. I operationally defined dialogic features of writing in terms of exophoric references and formulaic expressions. These are pronouns and demonstratives (exophoric references) and clichés (formulaic language) that refer to situational and cultural references outside of the written text. In the first study, description of place essays for a peer audience were used as a data base, and I found that across grades 4, 8, and 12, weaker writers learned to make their writing longer, but their longer texts contained the same proportions of inexplicit, speech-dependent meanings. Strong writers, on the other hand, showed a greater increase in length of texts accompanied by a significantly lower rate of dialogic features. In the second study, I wondered if explicitness of meaning would vary with assigned rhetorical context, that is, with purpose and audience. I found that it did. Strong writers at grades 8 and 12 varied the rate of dialogic features according to parent, peer, and editor audiences and according to explanatory and persuasive modes. Weaker writers made an apparent distinction only between peer and adult audiences, or between explanation and persuasion. In a third study, I used an illustrated narrative (from Bernstein [1975] and Hawkins [1977] in British research) which

tells a story of three boys playing soccer, getting yelled at, and running away. This time I used only weaker writers, and I found that extremely low mean rates of exophoric reference stayed about the same across grade levels (9, 11, and 13). This indicates that writers in the study had very little difficulty writing about the assigned illustrated narrative in a context-independent, or speech-independent, manner. The task presented writers with a complete and coherent universe, and writers were told that their readers would not have direct access to that universe. This is tantamount to telling writers all they need to know about a situational context and asking them to represent that context adequately in a written text. And even weak writers can do that.

Taken together, these studies suggest that it is access to information while writing that makes a text more or less dependent on reader access to wider contexts of situation and culture. Translation: if writing has dialogic features, I now believe that it is the act of writing that depends on speech, not the writer. The tendency toward dialogue suggests the writer could benefit from help which makes informational contexts accessible and meaningful.

My second reason for altering my view of writing development stems from my own recent experience as a writer. For nine months I worked on a paper called "Writing Development and Schooling." I grappled with questions like these: How is the writing ability of a person formed? How is it possible to take a developmental perspective on an artificial code like writing? To what extent is writing development a result of cognitive maturation? Or are cognitive abilities a consequence of

literacy? And where does instruction fit in? Two things happened as I attempted to answer these questions. First, I was reduced to a basic writer. Nothing I wrote made complete sense to me. Sentences were juxtaposed, run together, and connected with the wrong conjunctions. I was viewing things as causal when I should have construed them as conditional or temporal, and so on. Second, I had a constant urge to talk about my work. I talked it over with colleagues and students, with my wife, and even with my kids. I talked at home, in class, and at state and national conferences. From this experience I conclude that developmentally talk does not only turn into writing. Writing can turn into talk. When the going gets rough, every writer can use a little help from speech. At least I know I can.

What sustains me in this process is a sense that writing is useful. Unlike my twelfth grader in my opening anecdote, I know why I write — I'm driven by the pursuit of tenure and income to grapple with ideas. And if that sounds like an external motivation, so be it. Writing is a social skill; even the most personal kinds of writing have something to do with relations of power and solidarity among people. Writing always exists in a context, a human and therefore social one.

My third reason for changing my mind grows out of research that is still underway. In this work I am attempting to connect the writing experiences of unskilled writers with institutional and cultural contexts, and I am using in-depth interviewing to make this connection. These interviews ask unskilled writers to respond for about 40 minutes to each of two questions: What do you remember about learning to write? What is writing like for you now? To date, graduate students and I have

interviewed about 30 writers, and we are presently transcribing and analyzing the tapes for individual profiles and recurring themes. It is too early in this process for me to discuss the meaning our informants attach to their writing experiences. Still, I want to point out that I've already rejected the assumption that unskilled writers don't write. They do write, they tell us, in school and out, and they further claim more success with their own self-sponsored writing than with the writing they're required to do in school.

One example: Steven (not his real name) is a high school senior who intends to go to college. He attributes his general failure with school writing to his being a slow learner and to his not knowing enough about the conventions of writing. By conventions he means both the rules of grammar and certain prescribed forms writing is supposed to take. He illustrates the latter with an example he calls OPRC -- a formula for the persuasive essay which requires an "Opinion-Reason-Reason-Conclusion" format. Steven has failed the New York State Writing Competency Test three times. This fact is curious, since he reports success with his out of school writing. In one instance, for example, he wrote to the manufacturer of his car stereo to request repair parts. He then received a form letter stating that he would have to return the radio to the factory for repairs. He wrote again, telling the factory representative that returning the radio would be stupid and costly. Steven calls this a "dirty letter"; by this he means he showed some anger and thus broke the rule about always being polite in a business letter. He also had help in the writing from his brother and his parents. He received his radio parts.

Steven's case illustrates my point about the necessity of contextually meaningful writing practice. The writing of the radio parts letter was his idea, and it was motivated by a real need — an expensive radio that didn't work. He was willing to sustain the writing because it promised to be useful. And he was willing to share it, to seek editorial advice, to revise accordingly, and to exert power as a writer.

I want now to turn to the practical implications of these remarks. I have argued that unskilled writers show a tendency to produce writing which is marked by features of spoken dialogue. I've attributed this tendency not to a speech-dependent stage of writing development, but to the fact that certain writing tasks can call out context-dependent, cryptic, ill-formed writing from each of us. If there is a speech-dependent stage to writing development, then it is not something we outgrow; whenever the solitary act of writing about challenging topics gets to be too much, we slip right back to the need to talk about the writing.

The active connection with meaningful contexts is what makes writing useful. In transforming condensed inner semantic frames and images into explicit, communicative writing, we use written language to connect. We connect inner worlds of motivation and thought with outer worlds of language and experience. For unskilled writers, this connecting through writing leans on talk. We can help them best by giving them ample opportunities to talk about their writing, to put talk in the service of writing. As for writing assignments, I've decided not to make them. I don't think contextually meaningful writing

is something we can assign. Rather, it is something we can call out of our students by teaching them to be responsible for what they choose to write about. We provide the prompt, or cue, for writing, and our students provide the context and the text, and we help them transform these into academically acceptable writing.

"Why do I have to do this writing?" is a good question. Unless we can answer it — unless we can move the academic functions of writing in the direction of contextually meaningful functions — it seems to me that we have to question our motives as writing teachers.

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